

Eye of Jordan

Story by Dennis Vannatta



Photograph by Diane Liguori

Paulina Carol watched her little brother, Bill, push his peas around on his plate. This way and that, they rolled, although he was, of course, careful not to let any touch the cream of chicken soup that, with a little milk, salt, and pepper, constituted the sauce for Paulina Carol's Chicken a la King. Any that touched the Chicken a la King would have to be fished off the plate and deposited in the garbage before he would continue to eat. But it wouldn't put a damper on the meal for the whole family as it used to when, a pea treacherously careering into the sauce, Bill would let his head roll back as if a ligament had snapped in his neck and weep piteously up at the ceiling. It had been well over twenty years when Bill was still a teenager since he'd done that. Bill was living testimony to the possibility of improving oneself.

Paulina Carol watched him push the peas.

"You're off your feed tonight, Brother."

Startled out of his reverie, Bill jerked upright. He gestured vaguely at his plate, said, "The Chicken a la King. It tastes . . . different."

Paulina Carol closed her eyes and pressed her palms together. She seemed to be praying. But Bill and Charlotta Ann, the middle child, two years younger than Paulina Carol and three years older than Bill, knew better. Paulina Carol was either counting to ten in an effort to contain her anger or gathering strength to shout down the walls of Jericho.

"Now Bill," she said, her voice quivering only

slightly in righteous indignation, “you know very well that I follow Mama’s Chicken a la King recipe religiously, as I have every Wednesday night for the twenty-seven years since that sainted lady’s ascension. Religiously. Every Wednesday night. But perhaps I’m wrong. Perhaps I did do something differently tonight. Half a cup of salt instead of half a teaspoon, maybe. I’m only human, after all. Did I perhaps put half a cup instead of half a teaspoon in the sauce, Charlotta Ann?”

Charlotta Ann smiled smugly, knowing she was safe from her sister’s wrath. Not that she was afraid of Paulina Carol. True, Paulina Carol was an Arkansas Amazon, six-foot-two, a good head taller than her younger sister, with broad shoulders and hands strong enough to crack walnuts. Charlotta Ann, though, was no Kewpie Doll herself, built like a fireplug with even broader shoulders than Paulina Carol and Popeye forearms. She looked like a female weightlifter, although she never would have engaged in so unladylike an activity. She did, though, daily practice the old one-two upon the mattress leaning against the attic bedroom wall. She was prepared for home invasion. Eager for it, in fact.

“Paulina Carol, your Chicken a la King is perfection itself, as always. What’s wrong, Brother? I was just about to ask you that very thing when Paulina Carol spoke up. ‘What’s wrong, Bill?’ it was on the tip of my tongue to say.”

Bill put his fork down. He gulped. They distinctly heard him gulp.

“All right. I might as well tell you now. I was going to wait until later because I didn’t want to spoil your dinner.”

“You’re always so thoughtful, Bill. You’re the most thoughtful brother,” Charlotta Ann said, hefting herself up and waddling around the table to give him a hug.

“Yes, yes, Bill is thoughtful. Let that be acknowledged,” Paulina Carol said, “but sit down and let him tell his tale of woe. Something at work, no doubt.”

Having just reseated herself, Charlotta Ann threw her hands up and exclaimed, “Something at work! I should have guessed. Have they been making you talk to people? Have they tried to involve you in things?” Charlotta Ann said, pounding her right fist into her left palm.

“No, no. I’m happy to say they’ve been leaving quite alone. No one even came to me when John Destry’s wife died, and they were collecting money for flowers from the office. Someone just very discretely left an empty envelope on my desk for me to make a donation if I cared to do so. Now I call that considerate.”

“Yes, that was considerate,” Charlotta Ann said.

“Yes, so very considerate,” Paulina Carol said, drumming her fingers impatiently on the table. “Now tell us about it.”

“Well, it’s like this. I received a call.”

“A phone call!” the two sisters cried in unison.

“Yes. And not just any phone call. A *long-distance* phone call.”

Paulina Carol froze in an attitude of horror and consternation.

Charlotta Ann rose slowly from her chair. "Oh no," she said. "Oh no, no, no, no, no." She began to pace back and forth between the sink and the pantry door, moaning, "Oh no, no, no, no, no."

Paulina Carol came out of her trance. "But we never receive long-distance phone calls."

Charlotta Ann stopped pacing, pointed a corrective finger at Paulina Carol, and said, "You're wrong sister dear. We received a long-distance call in March of naught-four."

"You're right. How could I have forgotten? It was a wrong number, of course. Still, the trauma was—"

"Stop!" Bill threw his palm out like a traffic cop. "Charlotta Ann, what was that you just said? What year was that?"

"Naught-four. I'm positive because—"

"Aha! My ears didn't deceive me. 'Naught-four,' you said. Not oh-four but naught-four. No American since the battle of Bunker Hill has said 'naught.' You've been at it again, Charlotta Ann."

"No, Brother, I swear—"

"You've been at it again. You've been watching BBC America."

Charlotta Ann hung her head in shame.

Before Bill could bring down the wrath of a spiritual son of the Sons of Liberty, though, Paulina Carol snapped her fingers like a hypnotist bringing her

subject back to consciousness. "On point, Bill, on point! We can discuss Charlotta Ann's lapse at our Gripes and Grievances session Saturday night. It's time for us to get past the fact of the long-distance call to the content of the call."

"Well said, Sister," Charlotta Ann said, obviously glad to have the attention shifted from her unworthy person.

"Ahem, yes, well, the call, being long distance, was not from Little Rock. In fact, it was from Nebraska."

"Nebraska!" Charlotta Ann exclaimed, pressing her head between her palms again and beginning to rise from her chair once more, but Paulina Carol snapped her mannish fingers at her and commanded, "On point, Sister, on point!" Then, turning to Bill, "Yes then, Bill. Someone in Nebraska called you."

"Called *us* actually," Bill said, the pronoun correction coming as bad news to his sisters, who quailed.

"It concerned our cousin, Trixie Snodgrass. Trixie is . . . dead."

"Dead?" Charlotta Ann whispered. Bemused, she glanced at Paulina Carol, prepared to take her emotional cue from her older sister.

Paulina Carol didn't fail her. She pressed her palm against her chest, raised her other hand in a gesture indicating that she was prepared to descant.

"Trixie gone, dear Trixie, is it possible? She came to our mama's funeral, you'll remember, and we haven't heard from her since. No, she never bothered

us one time since. Now, I call that considerate.”

“You can’t ask for more from a relative,” Charlotta Ann said sententiously.

Bill cleared his throat. “Yes, well, that’s the thing. It seems there’s a daughter. The father is out of the picture—dead, I assume. It seems to be the case—and I verified this, I made phone calls—”

Charlotta Ann broke in, “Long-distance calls?”

“Yes, indeed.”

Charlotta Ann swooned.

“On point, Sister, on point!” Paulina Carol commanded.

“I made several long-distance calls and verified what the caller, a Mr. Bankhead, a lawyer, told me. That is, apparently, we are this girl’s closest living relatives.”

Charlotta Ann began to rise slowly from her chair. “Oh no, no, no, no, no.”

Paulina Carol attempted to look authoritative but began to slide sideways out of her chair. Bill lunged to grab her.

Holding her semi-upright with one hand (no small feat since she outweighed him, Bill being about Charlotta Ann’s size but fat where she packed muscle), he rushed on lest he lose heart, “We’re the closest living relatives, in fact the only living relatives Mr. Bankhead was able to find, and the girl is only seventeen years old and won’t reach her majority until August, at which point she’ll attend the University of Nebraska, a public institution devoted to the study of cows, if I’m not mistaken, but until then she can’t live by herself for

legal reasons, so it’s either live with us or in a foster home. It’s only three months. Three and a half. Three and change, as it were.”

Paulina Carol managed to right herself in her chair, but the effort robbed her of any energy to speak. Charlotta Ann spoke for them both, “Let’s put this to rest right now. It’s not on, Bill, it’s just not on.”

Bill glowered at Charlotta Ann, then leaned forward menacingly and hissed, “It’s just not on? Is that what you said? It’s just not on? No American since Washington swam the Delaware has ever said, ‘It’s just not on.’ You have, you have been watching BBC America again! Doggone it, Charlotta Ann, just *doggone it!*”

Paulina Carol had regained strength enough to say, “Language, Bill, language! You’re overwrought. We’re at each other’s throats over this calamity that has apparently befallen us. But you’ve already shown us our salvation. Either the young minx comes here or goes to a foster home, you said. Bingo. A foster home it is. Problem solved.”

“I’ve heard foster homes are quite nice,” Charlotta Ann said.

“Oh yes, quite nice,” Paulina Carol said. “They’re famous for being quite nice.”

“Actually,” Bill said, “Mr. Bankhead said they can be wretched places. He provided anecdotes. Shocking.”

“And you believed him? He’s a *lawyer*,” Paulina Carol said.

“There are lawyer jokes. We’ve heard them on TV,” Charlotta Ann said.

“Yes, there are. Tell us one, Sister.”

Charlotta Ann knitted her brow, at the same time grinning in anticipation of recalling one of the more humorous ones.

Bill forestalled this eventuality. “The thing is, I sort of told this Mr. Bankhead that we’d take the girl in for the summer.”

Paulina Carol and Charlotta Ann, “Bill!”

“The fact is, Jordan is on her way right now. She’s due in from Omaha at 6:14 on the Southwest Airlines.”

“But, but,” Paulina Carol spluttered. She truly did; she spluttered. “How is it possible? You get a phone call at work today, and before the day is over, this little chippy is almost on our doorstep?”

Bill blushed. “The truth is, the call didn’t come in today. It was Monday. I’ve been trying to work up the courage to tell you.”

“I knew it! You’ve been off your feed for days. Yesterday you came home with your package of Twinkies still in your lunchbox, *unopened*.”

Charlotta Ann, who’d been puzzling over something during this exchange, suddenly flung her arms up and bellowed, “Wait! What did you just say the name of this juvenile delinquent is?”

“Jordan.”

“Jordan! One of those trendy girls’ names taken from men. Madison. Sydney. I saw a girl *Henry* on TV just this week—and not on BBC America, brother dear,

a network station. It’s infected the whole country.”

Bill reluctantly agreed that it had.

“So, that settles it,” Charlotta Ann said with grim satisfaction. “She’ll be trendy. She’ll be trendy, and she’ll find us odd and laugh at us.”

“Of course, she will. We are odd,” Paulina Carol said.

“Indeed we are,” Charlotta Ann said. “Well, you and I are odd. Not Bill, of course. Bill works.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised, Sister. They find me very odd at the office.”

Charlotta Ann and Paulina Carol were thunderstruck.

Paulina Carol spluttered (yes, once again, she truly spluttered, this evening obviously being a special occasion), “But, but, but, you go out, Bill. You go *out*. Charlotta Ann and I never go out. We haven’t gone out since Mama passed.”

“Nevertheless . . .”

The three sat there sunk in misery, staring at their plates of congealing Chicken a la King.

Finally, Bill sighed and said, “Well, I’m sorry for it. I didn’t want this any more than you. You can take heart in the knowledge that you’re doing the Christian thing. That and the fact that it’s only three months and change.”

“The Christian thing, is it?” Paulina Carol scoffed. “Doesn’t the Bible say, ‘If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out?’”

“I really don’t see how—”

"It does, it does!" Charlotta Ann said. "The Bible quite clearly commands us, 'If her eye offend thee, pluck it out.'"

"We're Bible readers in this house, Brother. We have a Bible. Red Letter edition. We're people of the Bible. We're church people. We're members of the Cherry Valley Baptist Church, after all—even if we haven't been to church since Mama went."

"I don't know what you mean, 'haven't been to church,' Sister," Charlotta Ann said. "Surely you're not falling into that old trap of claiming that the church is a *building*. No, no, the church is the congregation, the members. Where we are is church. We're in church right now."

"You're right, Charlotta Ann, you're definitely right about that," Bill said, evidently coming around to the 'if her eye offend thee, pluck it out' school of thought.

"Very true. And don't forget, we even had that young preacher, that Reverend Mitchell in our house a year or so after Mama transitioned. He was wondering why we hadn't been to church—to the building, inside the building, I mean," Paulina Carol said.

"I remember it. He won't be trying that trick again any time soon," Charlotta Ann said, pounding her fist into her palm.

Bill, whose spirits had seemed to be rising only a moment before, was suddenly deflated again. "All this is well and good, but let's not forget: I agreed to it. It's a done deal. She's on her way."

"Dadgummit, Bill, dadgummit! Why oh why did you do it?" Charlotta Ann lamented.

"Sister! Language! How can you criticize our brother after all he's done for us? He goes *out*, after all. He goes *out*."

"True, true, true, true, true. I'm so sorry, Bill. I could bite my tongue off."

"Not to worry, Dimples. I have a thick skin. I have to, considering what I have to endure at work. Telephone calls and such. Besides, maybe we're over-reacting. This girl, this Jordan, who knows, she might be nice. She might like us. We might like *her*."

"Pardon me while I laugh," Charlotta Ann muttered.

"Indeed," Paulina Carol said. "And if she did like us, it might be even worse. How often have we seen some made-for-TV movie about some young trendy girl who for some reason moves in with an older relative—usually male, true, but that doesn't let us off the hook because Bill is most definitely a male and Charlotta Ann and I would be collateral damage—this young chit moves in with her older relative, very settled, quite content to let the world go on its own wicked way without him, this young chippy inveigles her way into his affections, which he's never had before being quite content to live without affections, worms her way into his heart and tries to change him, does change him, takes him out of himself, worse, much worse, takes him out of his *house*. Can you imagine it?"

"She'd better not try any of those dad-blasted

shenanigans around here,” Charlotta Ann said, pounding her fist into her palm.

“Language, Charlotta Ann, language!”

“Good God!” Bill fairly shrieked. “It just occurred to me. Where will she sleep?”

“Calm yourself, little Bubba,” Paulina Carol purred, employing the childhood endearment reserved for those crises when Bill was in danger of hyperventilating. “Sleeping arrangements are the least of our worries. We have the attic bedroom, after all, and there are extra sheets in Mama’s cedar chest. All we’d have to do is put the mattress back on the bed and—”

“Whoa, Nelly! Put the mattress back on the bed? But how will I practice the old one-two?” Charlotta Ann exclaimed.

“Dear God, forgive me. I hadn’t thought of that,” Paulina Carol said. “Oh, what has happened to our contentment?”

Bill seemed to be trying to respond—or perhaps he was just battling incipient hyperventilation. Whatever, he couldn’t speak.

Charlotta Ann could, though. Eyes narrowing in an attempt to appear sly, she said, “There’s one solution we haven’t thought of. You mentioned movies, Sister. Remember *Arsenic and Old Lace*? That old-timey movie? We saw it on TCM. TCM, Brother, not BBC America.”

“Cary Grant!” Paulina Carol enthused. “That darling man. Of course, I remember it. It’s one of my

favorites. These two sisters . . . oh, I see what you mean. *Arsenic.*”

Bill frowned in puzzlement. Then comes the dawn. “Arsenic, Charlotta Ann, *arsenic*? Surely you’re not thinking—”

“Well, whyever not? Isn’t that thing, that Jordan thing, isn’t she attacking our contentment? This is our lives we’re talking about. We only have one, after all. Well, three, technically, but only one apiece.”

“You can’t be serious, Charlotta Ann. After all, we’re a Christian family, a family of God,” Bill said.

Paulina Carol was about to invoke the ‘if her eye offend thee’ doctrine, but then slumped. “But what’s the use of even talking about it? We have no arsenic. Raid Ant and Roach Spray is the closest we could come to it, and I’m very much afraid that wouldn’t do the trick. Besides, even if we could lay our hands on the poison, how would we dispose of the young vixen’s body?”

“Easy,” Charlotta Ann said. “We have the meat cleaver.” She took several swings of the hypothetical cleaver in first vertical and then horizontal arcs, sending Paulina Carol ducking out of the way. “I took out that entire privet hedge with it. A young wench’s body would be easy. How about it? Division of labor, you produce the body, and I’ll dispose of it. It’ll make good fertilizer for the knock-out roses.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do it, really, don’t ask me,” Paulina Carol said. “I like to think of myself as a lady. Lord knows I don’t have much else to take pride in. Please

leave me with my ladyness. My ladyhood.”

Charlotta Ann patted her arm. “There, there, Sister dear. You’re absolutely right. You’re the lady of the house. No one could ever dispute that. Besides, producing the body is man’s work.”

The sisters looked at their brother. Their brother shrank back. He pressed his palms between his chubby knees and shook his head sorrowfully.

“No, it’s no use. I can’t do it. It’s just not in me. I’m not man enough. I’m sorry for failing you. Forgive me.”

Paulina Carol and Charlotta Ann pushed themselves up and lumbered around the table, hugged and caressed him. Tears all around.

They sat back down, sighed. Every mother’s son and daughter of them sighed.

Bill finally composed himself enough to say, “Well, I guess there’s no helping it. I have to make the long cold drive to the airport to pick up this Jordan person.”

Paulina Carol looked up at the clock. “What time did you say her flight was due in?”

“6:14.”

“Bill, it’s already 7:32.”

“7:32!”

“A miracle!” Charlotta Ann bellowed to the heavens. “Saved! Bill left the shameless hussy standing at the altar!”

“What are you saying? I have to go there, go there right now. I agreed to it. She’ll be waiting for me.”

“Waiting for you? Surely not, Brother. You would

have received a call,” Paulina Carol said.

“You surely would have received a call. And it wouldn’t even have to have been long distance, either,” Charlotta Ann said.

“You did supply your phone number, didn’t you, Bill? Surely you would have done that.”

“Well, I suppose I—”

“There you are. No call. And she couldn’t possibly be sitting there by herself waiting for you, a mere child like Jordan. The airline would never allow that.”

“Definitely not,” Charlotta Ann agreed. “Not with a mere child. Airline personnel are true professionals. Very conscientious people. They’d never allow a mere child to wander around the airport by herself with the element that hangs out there. Travelers and whatnot.”

Bill canted his head right, then left, pondering. Then he began to nod.

“You’re right. They would have escorted the mere child off the plane. Then, serving *in loco parentis*, I believe the legal term is, meaning parents right here and now, on the spot, they would have stayed with the mere child until she was turned over to a responsible adult. Yes, the more I think about it, I think that surely they would have sent the poor thing back to Omaha on the very next plane.”

“Sent her packing!” Charlotta Ann said.

“Let’s not get too excited, though,” Bill said. “They might just try to send her to us again tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? So what if they do? You agreed to

today, not tomorrow. You've done your Christian duty and can wash your hands of the whole sorry affair with a clear conscience. Just make sure you don't take any more long-distance calls at work," Paulina Carol warned.

All three turned and glared at the avocado-green telephone, rotary dial, hanging on the wall.

"We'll not answer *that* thing anymore, either," Paulina Carol, in full first-born mode now, commanded.

"I really can't justify paying that horrendous monthly fee for something that's never brought us anything but grief," Bill said.

"Amen, Brother, amen," Charlotta Ann said.

They sat there as relief, satisfaction and finally blessed contentment settled about them like—

The doorbell rang.

They froze in attitudes appropriate to each.

Paulina Carol in her awesome bulk bolt upright in the chair, ready to spring to the defense of her dear brother and sister as is only proper for the oldest child, standing in loco parentis, as it were, their dear Mama having assumed her rightful place at the foot of God twenty-seven years ago this April. Bill, bulbous butt-cheeks lapping over the sides of his chair, paralyzed with dread, a weak man, a soft man, but for all that braver than he knows, for does he not go out every day, is he not Bill, who goes *out*? And Charlotta Ann, a warrior woman, Popeye forearms raised, fists clenched in the pose of one prepared to deliver the old one-two. Or is that right hand not really clenched at all but

held open just enough to leave room within its curled fingers to grasp the meat cleaver? For, after all, is this not a family of God, and does not The Good Book command, if her eye offend thee. . .yes, verily, if her eye offend thee....